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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3880
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1164
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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3037
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7831
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5486
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0291
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2179
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000944

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/03/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM MOPS CE
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION COOPERATING TO PRESSURE PRESIDENT

REF: A. COLOMBO 883

¶B. COLOMBO 789
¶C. COLOMBO 748

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: The Ambassador met with Former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera on July 2 to discuss the goals of his newly formed Sri Lankan Freedom Party-Mahajana Wing (SLFP-M) and its new informal partnership with the main opposition United National Party (UNP). Samaraweera told us he hopes his cooperation with the UNP and others can bring the Government back to centrist policies, or failing that, form a new government. Last week, Samaraweera met with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and agreed to sign a Memorandum of Understanding outlining their common objectives and hold a joint rally on July 26 to protest corruption, increased living costs, and a breakdown in law and order. Samaraweera said he wants to bring the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) into this new parntership as well. He lobbied us to continue pressing the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) on human rights and a political solution to the ongoing conflict, arguing that the international community is one of the few groups that could potentially influence the President. End summary.

SLFP-M FORMS POLITICAL PARTNERSHIP TO PRESSURE GSL

¶12. (C) In a meeting with the Ambassador on July 2, former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera told us his newly formed political wing, the SLFP-M, is designed to pressure President Mahinda Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to "mend its ways and return to its mainstream principles." (ref A) Samaraweera explained that many core members of the SLFP are increasingly disgruntled because they perceive that corruption is rampant, the cost of living is increasing, and human rights conditions are deteriorating. Also adding to

their frustration, he said, is the lack of debate within the party. (Note: Media sources have quoted Samaraweera predicting optimistically another 20 SLFP members may join the SLFP-M. End Note)

¶3. (C) Samaraweera said the SLFP-M's first goal was to bring the President and the SLFP back to moderate principles. Failing that, it would push for a new government. He acknowledged it would be difficult and impractical to impeach the President and could envision co-habitation with the Government, not unlike the arrangement in the former government between then-President Chandrika Kumaratunga of the SLFP and then-Prime Minister Wickremesinghe of the UNP.

UNP AGREES IN PRINCIPLE

¶4. (C) Last week, Samaraweera formed an informal partnership with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe. Samaraweera said Wickremesinghe agreed in principle with Samaraweera's paper "Dare to Dream- towards a new Sri Lankan Order" which outlines a set of proposals that would, among other things, limit executive powers and change election laws. The media reported the UNP and SLFP-M are set to sign a Memorandum of Understanding outlining their common objectives and hold a joint rally on July 26 to protest corruption, increased living costs, and a breakdown in law and order.

JVP RELUCTANT

¶5. (C) Samaraweera said he also wants to bring the Sinhalese nationalist JVP into this new partnership. (Note: Samaraweera was credited with gaining the JVP's support for the President

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during his presidential campaign. End Note) Samaraweera said there were tensions within the JVP (ref C), and the party may increasingly be inclined to cooperate with the UNP and SLFP-M as criticism of the Government grows. Samaraweera admitted the JVP may be reluctant to help bring down the Government since the party would likely lose a significant portion of its 37 parliament seats in a new election. (Note: JVP spokesmen told the press they would not form an alliance with the UNP but were "open" to an alliance with the SLFP-M. End Note) He also explained that because JVP parliament members' salaries and pensions are paid directly to the party (equaling approximately 71,000 USD per year) there are financial, as well as political, reasons for the JVP to keep its seats in Parliament. Nonetheless, Samaraweera said the UNP's renewed vigor in opposing the President is creating "healthy competition" for the JVP. He noted the UNP's recent campaign against corruption spurred the JVP into action on corruption issues. Samaraweera was careful to draw the distinction between working with the JVP and forming a government with them, the latter being unlikely.

"GOTHABAYA'S GRIP"

¶6. (C) Samaraweera explained that although President Rajapaksa was politically savvy, the President's brother and Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, "stood in the way of anything constructive" and the President was in "Gothabaya's grip." He thought Gothabaya's strategy of further weakening the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE) before bringing them to the negotiating table was a faulty one that failed for the last administration. Samaraweera told the Ambassador that amidst increasing opposition, President Rajapaksa has become more obstinate and averse to criticism. He blamed the President's inner circle for discouraging dissent and "cushioning him from reality." Samaraweera predicted this insulation will worsen now that Gothabaya approves all appointments with the President.

PRESIDENT UNCOMFORTABLE WITH DEVOLUTION

¶ 7. (C) The Ambassador told Samaraweera that we continue to encourage the President, the UNP, and others to work towards a devolution plan acceptable to moderate Tamils (ref B). Samaraweera agreed a devolution plan like the one drafted in 2000 would be the best starting point for peace negotiations.

However, he said President Rajapaksa, uncomfortable with the idea of devolution, is now hiding behind the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and the JVP's resistance. Samaraweera thought even the President's support base in the South was beginning to worry about the state of human rights, the rising cost of living, and the war. He said the President, however, is worried about his immediate political survival and is therefore focused on the number of seats he can hold in Parliament rather than the bigger political picture.

THE ROLE OF THE WEST

¶ 8. (C) Samaraweera lobbied us to continue pressing the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) on human rights and a political solution to the ongoing conflict. He said the international community was the only group, other than a broad alliance of the opposition, which could potentially influence the President. Samaraweera asked us to use U.S. military training programs and visas as leverage against "certain individuals" in the defense establishment, including high ranking officials.

COMMENT

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¶ 9. (C) Samaraweera appears sincere in his efforts to effect positive change in the Government through a broad opposition alliance. Although the SLFP-M currently has only two members, some other dissatisfied SLFP members may join unless the President takes action to address their concerns. In the meantime, its alliance with the UNP could serve to reinvigorate the opposition to work constructively with the Government on a political solution. We will continue to push all sides to concentrate on cooperating on a workable devolution plan as a blueprint for peace.

BLAKE